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AUTHOR Nowak, Mary Jane
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ABSTRACT

Guidelines for the selection of students to undergraduate social work education programs are suggested in light of the growing recognition of the baccalaureate degree as the first professional degree in social work. The criteria for the selection of students to these programs has become more significant since their accreditation by the Council on Social Work Education in 1974. The history, implementation, and consequences of both open and selective admissions are examined. Four arguments in support of selective admissions policies for undergraduate social work programs are presented. It is suggested that selective admission is needed: (1) to maintain professional quality; (2) to provide an improved learning environment; (3) to facilitate career decisionmaking; and (4) to prevent an overflow of graduates for the limited number of job opportunities in the field. Guidelines for admissions policies, the admissions process, admissions standards, and admissions tools are detailed. The guidelines are based on the assumption that the opportune time to have a student officially declare a major is at the end of the sophomore year. It is suggested that selection at this point of a student's education would not interfere with the philosophy of open admissions to a university but does support the belief that a professional program has the right to protect its public by selecting those students best qualified to enter its ranks. (SF)

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Suggested Guidelines for Admission to Undergraduate Social Work Programs: Planning for the 80's

Mary Jane Nowak, Ph.D.

Arizona State University

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Suggested Guidelines for Admission to Undergraduate Social Work Programs: Planning for the 80's

Introduction

The growing recognition of the baccalaureate degree as the first professional degree in social work has helped focus social work educators' attention on admissions to undergraduate social work programs. Indeed, the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) accreditation of undergraduate social work programs, effective July, 1974, require a program to identify clearly admissions standards and procedures.[1] Admissions standards and criteria are one means for quality and quantity control in these programs. This paper reviews the problems related to admissions, presents a strong argument for a consistent point of view, and suggests guidelines for the selection of students for undergraduate programs in social work.

Two Philosophies of Admissions

There are two philosophies of admissions in the United States today--selective-and open-admissions. In turn we will describe their history, implementation and apparent consequences. Later in this section we will summarize our present dilemma in baccalaureate social work admissions.

With the beginning of the twentieth century, the need for more uniform requirements for college admissions gave impetus to the development of a college entrance examination. By June, 1901 the first College Board examinations were held and in less than ten years 25

leading eastern colleges and universities were using the standard examinations of the College Board.[2] In this way the College Board examinations supported one of the underlying assumptions in early admissions: selectivity so that only the best qualified students could go to college. By the 1940's this assumption had become philosophy for eastern colleges and universities, e.g., Harvard, Wellesley and others. They used the following criteria in the selection of students: (1) Graduation from an accredited high school, (2) rank in high school graduation class, (3) recommendation of principal or teachers, (4) scholastic aptitude or other intelligence tests, (5) personal interviews, (6) extra-curricular activities.[3]

Meanwhile, with the passage of the second Morrill Act in the late 1800's, public-supported state universities and land grant colleges chose a different assumption. This was that every person has the right to attend a university in their state. The open admission institutions were typically midwestern, more flexible in admissions criteria, and open to all who applied. While their "open admissions" philosophy was strongly advanced in certain instances, they also gave priority to high-ranking students.

Conflict of the Philosophies

These two philosophies of admissions were often rivals until after World War II. Then changes began to occur in undergraduate admissions. The major change in this period was a thrust for testing. College admissions officers began to individualize and to look at the total applicant. They began to use the College Entrance Examination more widely as a tool for admissions and to

help the student in choosing his major area of study. Some institutions based their decision to admit a student almost solely on the results of these tests.

The beginning of the 1960's found us in a state of confusion about admission of students to higher education, for example, California had its Master Plan for Higher Education. In this plan the junior colleges were indeed open to all. State college and university systems were more selective so that a hierarchy developed from junior college, state college to the university. Programs were changing particularly in the West, but both philosophies were still present in this country. The number of Americans enrolled in formal educational programs increased and the need for alternative methods of selection and educational patterns consistently increased.

Thrust for Open Admissions

Under the Johnson administration there was a commitment by the government to help higher education by removing financial barriers to education. This support was given to many students, regardless of intellectual ability as determined by traditional admissions standards. Johnson's dream of a Great Society in which we could provide every boy and girl with as much education as he or she could take gave further support to the philosophy of "open admissions." The U.S. Office of Education projections showed about nine million degree-seeking students in colleges and universities for the year 1975-76.[5] Although Nixon's lack of support of higher education may have had some effect on these predictions, the increase in the population attending institutions of higher education

has continued and has had an effect on admissions policies and requirements. The argument in favor of open admissions has been persuasive and consistent with the freedoms enunciated by FDR and by social work educators. However, this freedom without a concurrent recognition of the need for quality undergraduate social work education is a disservice to our students and to our profession. Thus, the historical stage is set for the present argument in favor of selective admissions for baccalaureate social work programs.

Reasons for Open Admissions

"Open admissions" as a philosophy and policy appear as the fundamental assumption supporting those who oppose any selection attempts by program faculties. The five major arguments for open admissions appear to be as follows: (1) "Open admissions" is the fundamental policy of land grant and many other public institutions; (2) selection is a form of professional elitism and contraindicated by "open admissions;" (3) non-selection is a far greater trauma than letting students discover that they are unable to complete the program of study; (4) grading practices can control the enrollment in any given program (which simply delays the trauma for many students); and (5) absence of evaluative tools by which faculties can judge the potential success of applicants with a high degree of accuracy. Indeed, Esser and Freud[6] almost ten years ago urged that social work educators develop evaluative tools for the social work professional preparation program. Although, studies have been conducted, primarily on graduate social work students, few valid tools for assessment of potential for social work have been found.

Reasons for Selective Admissions

In the absence of meaningful, valid and useful selection techniques we can develop guidelines to monitor our responses to a host of important questions from various constituencies. Directors of social work undergraduate programs must respond to frequent questions from social work educators, from students, from parents, from professional associations and from the public about admissions to social work programs. Why should there be admissions standards and criteria in institutions of higher education for entrance into a major area of study? Shouldn't any student have the right to choose his or her own area of study? Doesn't the open admissions policy of most public institutions of higher learning entitle a student to the right to choose his or her own career and try any program he wants? These are valid questions. There are probably as many people who would answer 'yes' as there are those who would answer 'no' to these perplexing questions.

A number of salient arguments can be offered in favor of selecting students for an undergraduate social work program. By this we mean the initial screening by test data, interviews, recommendations and observations of candidates for our program. Other program monitoring phases might occur within the program as retention-decisions and near the end of the program as graduation-decisions. We see admissions, retention and graduation as three important procedures in the professional education of undergraduate social work students.[7] The major thrust of this paper is on the first important procedure, selection. Briefly, four important arguments in support of selection for undergraduate social work programs

will be advanced.

Trained as a Professional

First, these programs have professional training as their main mission leading to the development of the beginning social work practitioner; therefore, there should be program selection so that faculties can set entrance requirements in the same way as other professional units within a university system do. Many of these units, e.g., Medicine, Dentistry, Law, Allied Health, Nursing and more recently Architecture and Education, have moved to restrictions on admissions. The two principle reasons are: (1) to control the quality of the program, and (2) to maintain the quality of the program by having clinical placements or physical facilities available for training. Indeed, professional units including social work training programs serve a responsibility to their profession through the control of admissions and the performance of standards in their programs.

Improved Learning Environment

Second, selection should result in a marked improvement in the teaching-learning environment for students who are permitted to enroll in the program. Selective admissions permits small classes which allow for peer judgement and criticism as well as close supervision by instructors. Peer interaction and instructor supervision are vital components of a professional program. Further, these environmental conditions allow for an optimum teaching-learning situation which would attract students with a higher potential for the field, with a higher performance capability, and which should give status to the program.

The indiscriminate recruitment and retention of students beyond the point when they should have been counseled out of a program can be educationally unsound, unethical, and disastrous. The loss in time, energy, and resources plus the frustration to the young student by indiscriminate practices points to the need for a good selection program both on the program objectives and the goals of the individual student.[8] The use of institutional resources for a selection in process, based on educational decision making, can save human and financial resources.

Facilitate Career Decision-Making

Third, selective-admissions can help the student in his career decision-making process. When we consider that the individual spends a relatively short period of his life in college, we also must recognize that he cannot afford to make mistakes in his choice of institution, courses and program of study. Iffert[9] suggests one of the major factors in students' withdrawal from college is their inappropriate choice of the institution they attend. He points out that over one-half of the undergraduates in his study changed their major field of study. Many students who made an incorrect choice of institution and program of study found they had to withdraw from college because of academic failure, general dissatisfaction and lack of money. Other studies[10] showed that during the first and second years of college, the student changed a great deal, and that these changes remained with him throughout his life. Panos and Astin reported the following:

> The declared major field choice of entering freshmen is notoriously unstable. In one recent study of high ability

> students . . . 66 percent of the boys and 76 percent of the girls made major shifts in their career plans during or soon after college. Reasons for this unreliability are not always apparent, although the college undoubtedly plays some part in the process.[11]

These results suggested selection of a major program at the end of the sophomore year, rather than earlier. The choice of a proper course of study is an act of great personal importance because students want to develop their full potential and meet their capacity to achieve. The many changes, drop outs, and failures appear to substantiate the need for a good advisement system and admissions standards for the program of study.[12]

Limited Job Opportunities

Fourth, supporting selective admissions into a program is the limited job opportunities for graduates in certain areas of the country. We see an increasing recognition for some agreement between the number of students selected for a program and the job market. This need is especially crucial for today. In the latter 1960's the number of students choosing a social work major grew dramatically. There were many reasons for the growth of enrollment in these programs. For example, the interest of contemporary youth in their fellow man, the presence and publicity given to the programs of the "Great Society" and the conditions of the day which affected the job market in other people-oriented careers are a few. The dramatic rise of enrollment in many social work programs adversely affected the resources (field sites, classroom space) and the student ratio. Thus, well thought out and carefully

administered selection procedures suggest a positive move on the part of social work educators away from a situation which may breed mediocrity toward quality programs whose graduates will be better prepared to face the challenges of a professional career.

State of the Art

In the eye of this continued controversy in program selection and the derth of evaluative tools, social work educators have developed a set of conceptual approaches to the selection of applicants with potential for the profession. A set of qualities have been identified that are felt necessary for the professional practice of social work. Some of these important qualities which program faculties have considered are initiative, motivation, ability to relate to others, verbal ability, sensitivity to the needs of others, intelligence, social consciousness, maturity, and self awareness. The tools that have been used to evaluate the presence of these qualities in applicants to social work programs have been a combination of the following: grade point average, interview, autobiographical statement, reference letters, employment history, and a review of the applicant's college record. Still dissatisfaction with the available procedures continue to frustrate social work educators.

A combination of these faculty judgement qualities and evaluative tools are needed in a program selection phase of any social work program, particularly at the undergraduate level. Traditional academic tests are a help in the prediction of academic success i higher education but they tell little of the personality of the applicant. Super and Bohn suggest the performance of the professional

person does not necessarily correlate with his academic achievement.[13]

Social work has traditionally placed emphasis on values and personal qualities of its applicants for advanced education as well as the applicant's academic achievement. Towle states that: "In professional education a student is expected to acquire ideas, habits, attitudes, interests, ways of feeling, thinking and doing which he did not have before he entered a professional school."[14] It was through an admissions process, Towle believed, that the determination of the students' capacity for change could be made.[15] Therefore, students should have certain attributes upon entering a program which will permit the change needed to enable him to function in the milieu of the profession. Towle suggested the setting of admissions standards which included a high level ability to learn, a strong ability to relate to people, and the potential to develop a social conscience. While these suggestions evade the issue of selection standards they are suggestive of a direction for admissions standards. Presently we should strive to agree on guidelines for program selection.

Guidelines for Social Work Admissions

Many factors influence the admission of students to their major area of study. These factors are determined by the characteristics and goals of the profession. They may be motivational and personal (intrinsic), and/or academic (extrinsic), and certain of these may be unique to individual situations. Accordingly, the standards of admission should be flexible. Some students will be strong in some but not in all areas. We should be able to adapt to these individual differences.

The expectations and tasks of a profession and of any particular professional school will largely determine that school's admissions standards. These program limitations will shift depending upon financial resources, faculty makeup, and community needs. We argue that admissions standards are needed for professional social work education. We also argue that program faculties, enrolled students and potential employers should assume the responsibility for making decisions on who will be admitted to such educational programs. Nowak[16] carefully studied admissions practices in undergraduate programs and based upon these results developed twelve guidelines for selecting baccalaureate social work students.

Four broad areas are represented by these guidelines. In the first area, Admissions Policies, five guidelines are offered:

Guideline 1: Admissions policies should be established by the action of the faculty, including participation by student and agency representatives of the department or school of social work in which the undergraduate social work program is located. These policies should be subject to modification and change by the future action of a similarly constituted body.

Guideline 2: Authority for the admissions of individual undergraduate students to the social work program should be delegated by the President of the host institution to the Dean or Chairman of the university unit in which that program is located. The Dean or other designate, in turn, delegates the operational aspects of admissions to an Admissions Director.

Guideline 3: The Admissions Director should be a full-time faculty member with a MSW degree.

Guideline 4: A committee of the social work faculty should be appointed by the Dean or Chairman of the department, or a committee of the whole should be constituted, for the purposes of:

1. Developing, maintaining and reviewing policies governing the selection of students to the program in light of changes in the objectives and needs of the department or school;
2. Presenting to the Dean, Chairman or appropriate body suggested changes or modifications for faculty action; and
3. Reviewing and screening applicants to the program.

Guideline 5: All undergraduate social work faculty may be called upon to interview applications when necessary, review applicant's folders, and make recommendations concerning admissibility to the program. In the second area, Admissions Process, Nowak offers three guidelines:

Guideline 6: The purpose of an admissions process should be to assist the faculty in determining the applicant's suitability for undergraduate social work education, and for the particular undergraduate program for which he is applying, in accordance with the objectives of that department or school.

Guideline 7: Admissions to an undergraduate social work program should be at the end of the sophomore year and on a selective basis.

Guideline 8: The selection of an applicant should be based on the quality of the applicant's total profile, without discrimination on the basis of race, color, creed, ethnic origin, age or

sex. In the third area, Admissions Standards, we recommend:

Guideline 9: The admissions standards for the department or school should be explicitly stated, but be flexible to allow for exceptions in cases where an applicant does not meet all the requirements but exhibits a potential for the program and profession.

Guideline 10: The standards should include the following:

1. That a student should not be admitted to the social work program nor be required to officially declare his major in social work until the end of his sophomore year of study. Students may indicate an interest in the program and take beginning courses within the social work program during the freshman and sophomore year.
2. That prerequisites should be explicitly stated for each program:
   a. General liberal arts courses should be recommended and offered in preparation for social work program;
   b. Certain social and behavioral science courses should be required as foundation or supportive courses for the social work program.
3. That the applicant's undergraduate academic record for the first two years of college study should suggest potential for continued study.
4. A minimum cumulative grade point average of C for the first two academic years.

5. That applicants having a grade point average lower than C may be admitted on a conditional basis, and be given the junior year (two semesters) of study to demonstrate their ability.
6. That the following personal criteria be in evidence to a high degree in the applicant:
   a. Sensitivity to the needs of others;
   b. Ability to relate to others and form relationships;
   c. Interest in and ability to work with people;
   d. Mental and emotional maturity (consonant with this age group);
   e. Readiness for self-evaluation (self-awareness);
   f. Ability to identify with the profession of social work;
   g. Social consciousness;
   h. Motivation.

Guideline 11: The applicant's work experience, and extra-curricular and community service activities should be evaluated as part of his total profile. In the fourth area, Admission Tools, the twelvth guideline is:

Guideline 12: Suggested tools for use in gathering the foregoing information to determine the applicant's suitability are:

1. Review of applicant's college record to determine:
   a. His standing, e.g., sophomore or junior;
   b. Foundation courses successfully completed that are either recommended or required for the social work program;

c. Grade point average for the first and second year of study.

2. Application form.

3. Letters of reference from:

   a. Instructors in certain other disciplines, on a selective basis;

   b. Instructors of social work introductory courses;

   c. Employers, where applicable;

   d. Relevant others.

4. Employment history.

5. Autobiographical statement.

6. Pre-admissions interview.

7. Role playing.

8. Video taping.

These twelve guidelines are a strong step in the direction of providing an adequate undergraduate social work program which will prepare competent individuals to practice effectively and fully in the profession. We still see a host of problems facing undergraduate social work educators such as careful statements of program goals, refined and articulated program objectives, new institutional willingness, followup of program graduates, and above all dedicated, competent faculty models for advising students within the program.

Conclusion

This paper has presented the dominant philosophies of admissions practices which are active in the 70's. It has argued for a rigorous and careful selection of students for our undergraduate social work programs, and in so doing, it has remained in keeping with the dominant philosophies. The guidelines are based on the assumption that the opportune time to have a student officially declare his major is at the end of his sophomore year of study. Selection at this point does not interfere with the second philosophy of open admissions to the university community as a whole but does support the belief that a professional program has the right and duty to protect its public by selecting those students best qualified to enter its ranks.

It is the author's belief that selective admissions is a necessary but not sufficient part of the complete admissions, retention and graduation process for undergraduate social work training process. Still in front of us lie the issues of mastery learning, licensure of B.A. graduates and paraprofessional training. In any case we believe that selective admissions will be necessary for planning for the 80's.

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